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Sherlock Jr. (1924)

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Throughout his cinematic career, Buster Keaton was never particularly considered to be a producer of films that were socially or politically engaged. In contrast

to the social commentary evoked in Chaplin's the 'Tramp', or reflected in the bespectacled character of Harold Lloyd, Keaton was deemed as more of a generic 'funny man'; a silent film star who offered a highly physical slapstick comedy. Although he was rediscovered in the 1960's, the films of Buster Keaton have been long critically overshadowed by those of Charlie Chaplin. James L. Niebaur argues that academics have traditionally invested a larger degree of critical engagement upon the films which held more of an explicit social or political representation and 'stow praise on

the intellectually stimulating silent films, and reject with apathy anything that was no more than a purely visceral approach to comedy' (Niebaur, p3, 2010).

However in recent years Keaton's work has been revived and his films have been judged to possess a greater deal of skill, depth and meaning than was heretofore acknowledged. They reflect issues of identity, alienation, and social individuality, together with an intelligent use of self-reflexivity and a number of innovative cinematic techniques. One film which stands up to critical re-

discovery one of Keaton's most celebrated: *Sherlock Jr* (1924).

Sherlock Jr is a film from the middle to late era of silent film, with Keaton both starring in and directing the feature. It tells the story of the 'Boy', played by Keaton, a lowly cinema projectionist who dreams of becoming a famous detective. He is in love with a 'girl', yet is deceived by a rival who frames him for stealing her father's pocket watch. Failing in his attempt to solve the crime, he returns to his projectionist booth and dreams he is the detective within the projected film, which is a parallel of

the events in reality. In the dream the boy solves the case and escapes with the girl, yet in reality it is her who unearths the truth and she returns to him, ending the story and the film. The film is incredibly innovative, using pioneering cinematic techniques that would still evoke a sense of spectacle within modern cinema. It uses self-reflexivity and 'Brechtian' ideals of cinema to convey meaning, reflecting issues of social identity and a exploration of the fine line between reality and dreams.

Throughout the film, Sherlock Jr plays with ideas of reality and

fiction and the distinction between them. The film employs two narratives, one imagined and the other set in the film's diegetic reality. This parallel of narratives gives Keaton the ability to offer a comedic analysis of an individual's identification with those on screen. The narratives are very similar, and the same characters appear in both, yet there are significant differences from those in reality are those within the dream. For example in reality the boy is a humble projectionist, a character often dominated by others, such as his boss at the cinema and his rival who frames him. He is a modest

character, both financially and socially, who struggles to realise his dreams of becoming a detective. Yet within the dream, he is transformed, no longer the 'boy' but the renowned master detective. He wears an expensive looking suit and conveys a sense of control in situations. He also consistently outwits and outthinks his rivals, reflected in the snooker scene where he manages to escape several traps and tricks set upon him. In reality he fails to achieve his goal, unable to solve the case he returns to the projection room. Yet in his dreams he is successful, resolving the

crime and winning the girl. It could be argued that this is a satirical comment on the glamorisation of cinema and those who identify with it, who literally project themselves on screen in an idealised notion. In fact all of the characters are glamorised within the dream narrative, the girl wears a simple gingham dress in reality but within the dream she wears an elegant black gown. This exploration of projected realities and cinematic truths takes place throughout the film, a theme which Ira Nayman argues to be the real purpose of the film suggesting that 'the stolen pocket watch is not the main

purpose of *Sherlock Jr*, it is only a set up for what the film is really about, a exploration of the differences between the cinematic world and the real world' (Nayman, 2008, p40).

This theme is further developed through the use of a cinematic technique which explores realism and the imagined. Andrew Horton argues that *Sherlock Jr* is film which offers a 'playful and ironic bending of the conventions and dimensions of cinema' (Horton, 1997, p20).

This is particularly evident in the scene where the 'boy' falls asleep and enters the dream world through the screen within the

theatre. After falling asleep the 'boy' walks through the theatre, up onto the stage and climbs into the cinematic dream world. This scene epitomises the film's exploration of cinema and reality. The sequence is shot from a long distance, framing the screen and the audience. This frame gives the impression of the spectator as being within the theatre, watching the events unfold. This scene is considerably self-reflexive; we as the audience are viewing a film where we are impressionistically positioned within a viewing theatre, to watch a character from a film, enter another film within it. This

scene also comments on the conventional Hollywood mode of filmmaking. When the 'boy' enters the world of the cinema, the scene around him constantly changes, it cuts from a busy street to a cliff top to a pack of lions amongst others. It could be argued that this is a parody of the formulaic nature of mainstream cinema.

Sherlock Jr should be complex given its narrative, yet the transition from reality to dream world is relatively seamless. By staging most of the narrative within a character's dream, Keaton is given license to instil a number of 'gags' which would seem

implausible within a narrative set in reality. As John White argues, 'although ambiguous and unconventional the creation of a film within Buster's dream, within the film it does not threaten the internal logic of Sherlock Jr's fictional world, it even serves to give it sense' (White, 2009, p48). The cinema theatre is a good example of this, although there are several throughout the film. In one scene Keaton appears to jump through someone to escape, in another he jumps through a window into a moving car. By staging the narrative within a dream like world, Keaton can push

the cinematic boundaries further than many comedians before him. Thus, Keaton can perform tricks than astound and amaze audiences while remaining somewhat plausible.

Sherlock Jr also offers an interesting social commentary. Perez describes Keaton as a comedian who 'proposes no defiance of the world's ways, on the contrary, he strives for a compliance with them, the outsider who will not give up the attempt to join in and connect with others' (Perez, 1981, p339). This is consistently reflected throughout *Sherlock Jr*, Keaton's 'boy' is

framed and deceived by numerous individuals yet never really expresses any sense of emotional resentment, and when he does its only through his subtle gestures and nuances. Throughout he remains stoic and unwavering, living up to his famous nickname, 'The great stone face'. At the end of the film when he has the girl within his arms, he cannot emotionally connect with her, only achieving this through copying the characters within the film. Yet throughout *Sherlock Jr* he is consistently trying. He is somewhat emotionally stunted but tries to connect through the only way he

knows, re enacting that on screen. And when his dream of becoming a detective cannot be realised he is accepting of his place in society and within the real world.

Sherlock Jr is a highly imaginative and inventive film comedy that explores ideas of reality and cinema through experimental filmmaking techniques. It offers both a social and a philosophical commentary, at times appearing both surrealist and absurdist. It considers notions of the real and toys with ideas of entering dream worlds, long before films such as 'Inception'. Perez argues that 'easy as it is to like Keaton the

funny man, it has been difficult to properly to appreciate his artistry' (Perez, 1981, p346). I would argue that *Sherlock Jr* acts to reject this notion. From this commentary it is evident it offers a great deal of depth, meaning and artistry, as well as, a vast amount of comedy.